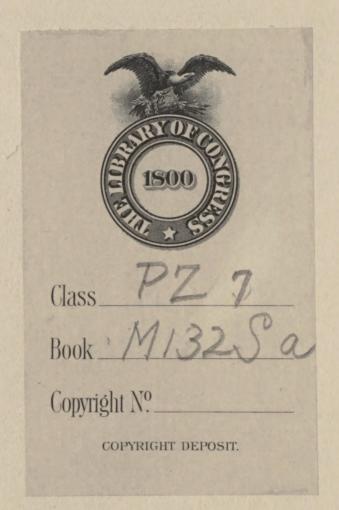
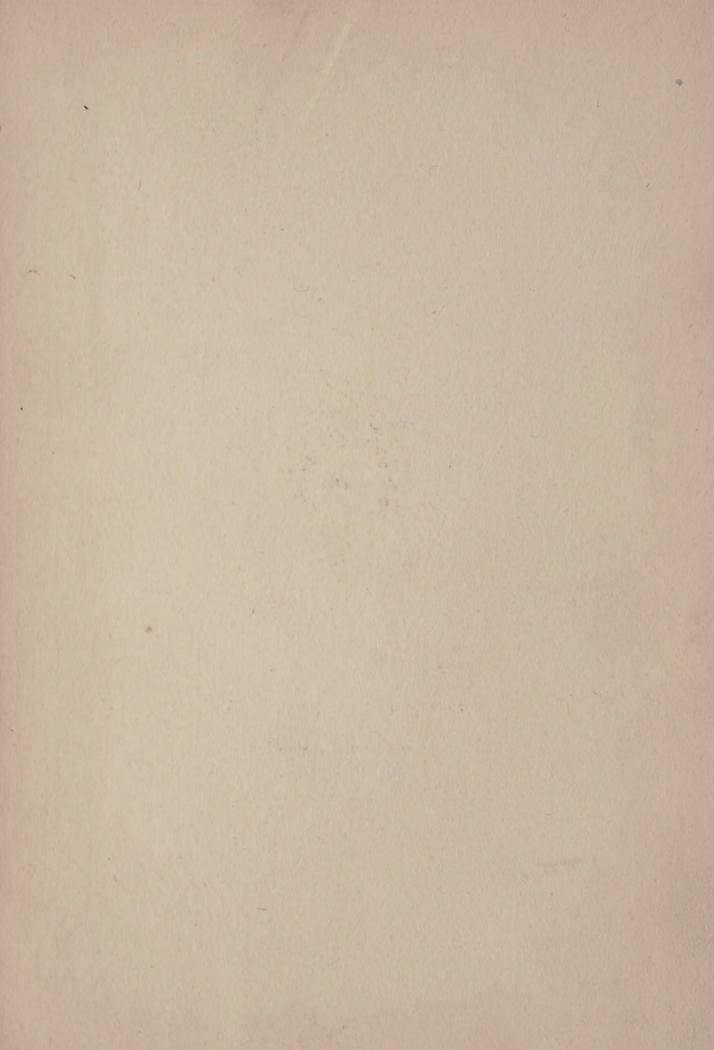
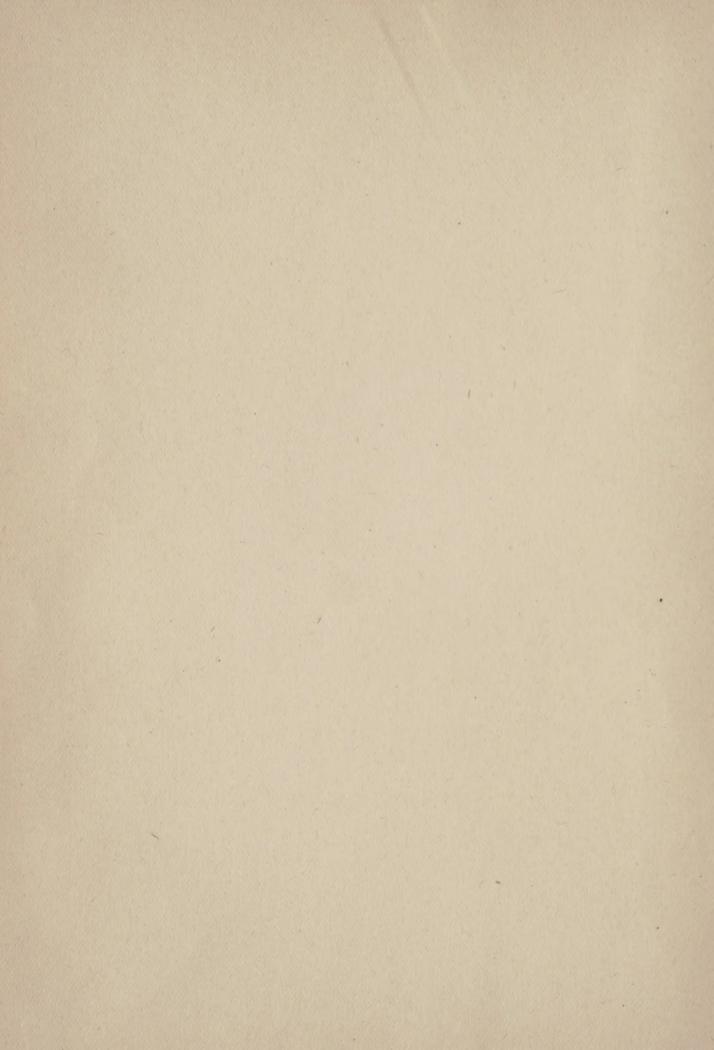
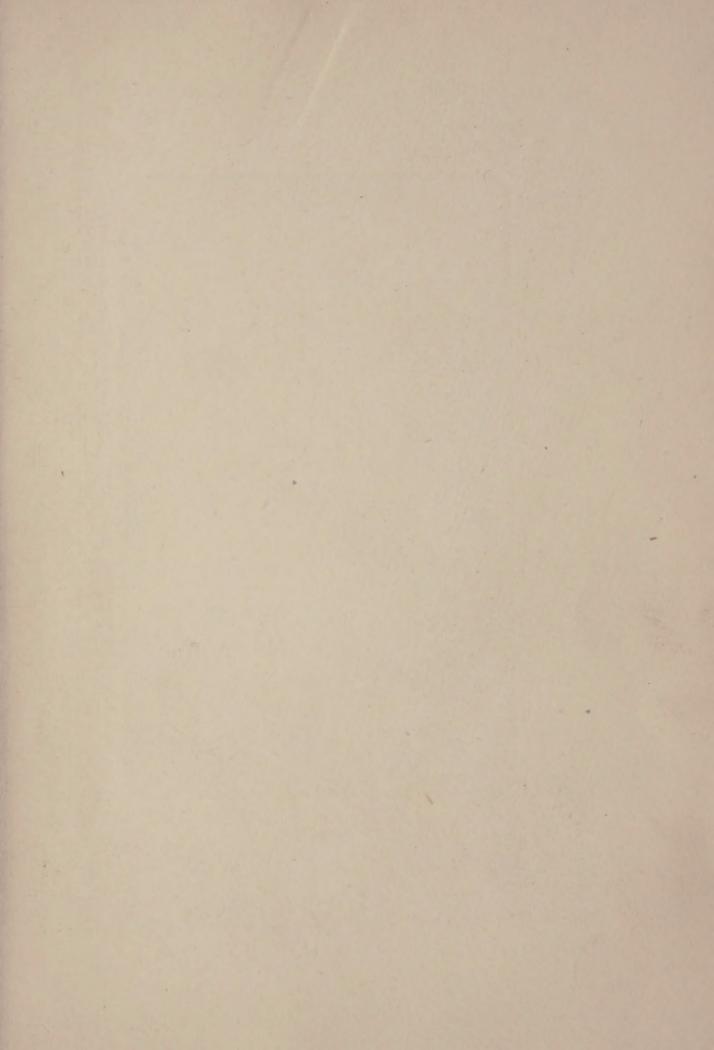


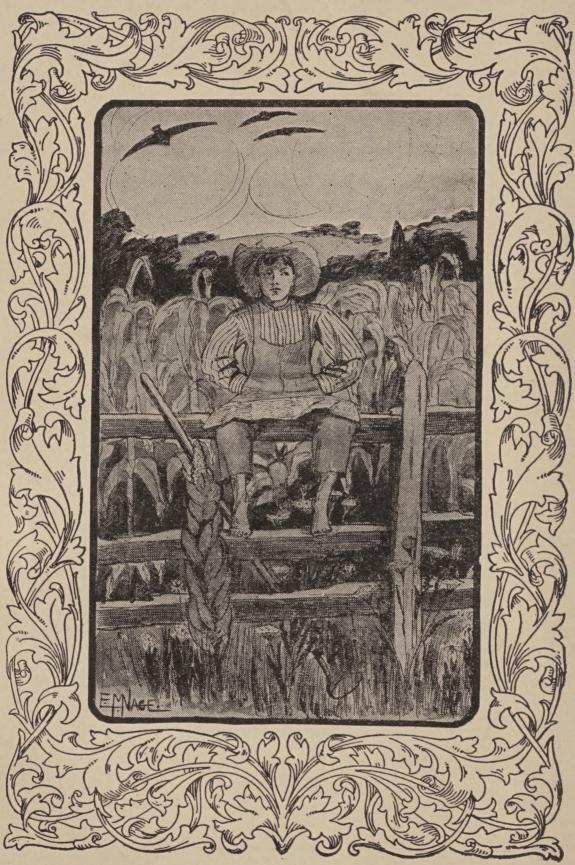
M.G. MCCLELLAND











"Fourteen ye'r ole, an' I dunno nothin'!"

S A M

BY
M. G. McCLELLAND

With Illustrations by

E. M. NAGEL



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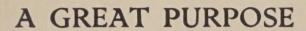
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Sam

CHAPTER I

GREAT PURPOSE

"DOURTEEN ye'r ole, an' I dunno nothin'!"

The words were uttered sotto voce, and the tone had a disgusted inflection. The boy—Sam Colston—rooted his hands deep into the pockets of his butternut trousers.

He was sitting, boy fashion, on the top rail of an old worm-fence, with his heels drawn up in a crack to form a rest. On them was outspread an open circular, clearly printed on pink paper and illustrated with woodcuts. It had a grease-spot in one corner, as though it had recently formed part of the contents of a

lunch-basket, and the centre of the paper showed a multitude of fine wrinkles, due probably to its having been roughly crumpled ere it had been cast aside. The previous day Sam had found it in a fence-corner, blown thither from some unknown quarter.

The pictures had interested the boy, touching him in a spot vitally responsive; but the text baffled him, withholding its secret. He could not read.

"I wish dad had been some account," the boy muttered. "'Tain't no use wishin' he 'd change now, bein' he 's ole, an' riveted to his ways with rheum'tism. But I 'd ha' been pow'ful proud if he 'd started some account an' kep' on. Weall mout'r had some chance to learn sense if we-all had n't had to scuffle for our livin' an' his'n sence mammy died."

Sam's glance left the circular and wandered abroad over the cornfield, where the green stalks stood in knee-high rows, over the bit of creek-bottom given up exclusively to sweet potato and melon patches, and beyond to the broom-sedge barren where the dun cow and little hornless heifer nosed about and browsed.

He was not thinking of what he saw, although in another mood the vigor of the young corn and its freedom from weeds, the fine condition of the cattle, and the fact that the vines were beginning to run, would have filled him with pride. He was a good farmer in a primitive way, and possessed a store of practical information. Just now all beauty and promise had vanished from the heavens above and the earth beneath, because a bit of printed paper, carelessly flung aside by a way-farer, and as carelessly picked up, lay there on his knee, mutely defying him to penetrate its meaning.

After a little he carefully folded the paper and stowed it away in an old pocketbook. Then he jumped from the fence on the cornfield side and went back to his work, seizing

his hoe and chopping vigorously at weeds and wild pea-vines.

A dog, resting in the shade of a fence-corner, lifted his muzzle from his folded paws and drew back his lips from his teeth in a derisive grin, as though in his opinion energy in hot weather was sheer foolishness. Then he resettled himself to slumber until the dinner-horn should blow.

The lad's mind worked in unison with his muscles. By applying himself steadily he could finish the five or six corn-rows that were still unweeded by dinner-time. He might have finished before, but for puzzling so long there on the fence.

The brother next him in age, who usually shared his labor, had gone over to the mill with grist, and that was an all-day job, driving steers. After dinner he, Sam, would run down to the store and get this haunting bit of paper disposed of. The storekeeper could read printing, and so could his wife. The

store was only five miles away, and the afternoons were long.

Charley would be home early enough to feed the stock and help their sister Millie with the night-work. He could not wait about the paper.

The sun waxed to the meridian; the shadows lay evenly, each tree and bush standing in its own, like a cup in its saucer. The dog lifted his head from time to time and yawned. Through the still blue of the upper atmosphere buzzards sailed lazily, on almost motionless wings, with heads down-bent, scanning the drowsy earth.

In a sycamore amid the broom-sedge a mocking-bird trilled out joyously, importing into his song clever imitations of his neighbors. The cow and the heifer had withdrawn to a thicket of pine-scrub for a season of cudchewing repose.

Only the boy worked on, his hoe moving steadily, every stroke falling where it would do the most good. Perspiration beaded his sunburned face and hands, and flattened the cotton shirt to his bending shoulders. His bare feet were clay-stained nearly to the color of the soil. There were still many corn-hills to be worked, and Sam never let go a thing he had put his hand to until it was finished.

From a distance, around the shoulder of a hill, came the resonant clangor of a horn, loud and mellow in tone, but giving out the notes of its call with hesitation, as if blown by one unaccustomed to its use. The mocking-bird, silenced, inclined his head and listened.

Then, deciding that the new notes were an audacious challenge, the bird squared himself, puffed out his breast, swelled his throat, and duplicated them, with their irregularity and imperfection cleverly accentuated. The derision was drolly manifest, and Sam laughed as he stooped for a pebble, which he tossed in the direction of the sycamore.

"Quit makin' fun o' our baby," he shouted.

"You could n't make no better music yo'se'f till you larnt."

Then he shouldered his hoe and climbed the fence at a point where a well-worn path came

down to it. The dog was already disappearing round a bend ahead, evidently considering the summons specially intended for him.

At a small stream which the path crossed, Sam paused to cool his feet by paddling them in the water. He stooped



and bathed his face and hands also.

He had an old face, heavy-jawed and serious, like the face of a man. His features were strongly marked, and his skin tanned and freckled. His eyes were dark and had, habit-

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ually, the quietude of expression peculiar to the eyes of those who dwell in communities where changes are slow.

His frame was spare and large, even for a lad of his age. He looked that which he was, a capable, reliable fellow, tenacious of grip and of purpose.

"Sam favored his mammy," the neighbors declared; "an' she were a likely 'ooman, smart as God makes 'em, an' hard-workin'.

"Did n't look like Sam had ary drap o' that 'ar sawny, do-nothin' Colston blood in him, Sam nor Charley nuther. Boys gin'ally took arter the spinnin'-wheel side, an' 't war a mercy, too, oftentimes. Eve'ybody knowed Jim Colston war n't wuth the powder an' shot 't would take to shoot him."

As Sam turned into the road from the sidepath, his attention was caught by a horseman coming slowly into sight. The man had a bag of corn across his saddle, and slouched a trifle forward. Sam recognized him at once and,

dominated by a sudden impulse, paused and waited for the rider to come up.

It was the Methodist minister, or the "circuit-rider." Every man, woman, and child on his circuit was personally known to old "Brother Gardner," and as he pulled up his horse beside the boy he smiled down on him cheerily.

"Well, Sammy, my son, how are you?" he asked cordially. "An' how are the folks at you-all's? I'm on my way to mill, you see, for the good Lord ain't found me helpless enough to need ravens to tote in my bread yet."

"They'll be along whenst you need 'em," said the boy; then, mindful of his manners, he replied to the social inquiries, and made responsive ones in his turn. He was very good friends with the preacher, who had married his parents, and had also, a few short years before, said kindly, heartfelt words of love and promise over his mother's grave.

Sam pulled out his paper and tendered it eagerly.

"It 's lucky you happened along, Mr. Gardner," he said, "or ruther that I met you. I 've got a paper here I 'll be obleeged to you fur readin' to me. I found it flung away by somebody passin', an' drifted in a fence-corner. The picters put me in mind o' our Bunny. Look here at 'em."

The preacher flattened out the circular on his meal-bag, and searched in his pocket for his spectacles. Then he read the document aloud with great deliberation.

The circular was the annual report of a school for spinal cripples, located in a city near the seaboard. It was comprehensive and clear in its statements, and gave good references.

One side of the sheet was devoted to an illustrated notice of a dispensary connected with the school, where spinal cripples were furnished with plaster of Paris jackets made

after an improved method, and given the benefit of thorough and constant treatment. A certified list of deformities which had been permanently cured was given, and the little woodcuts showed the gradual straightening

of deformed limbs and backs.

It was explicitly stated that the younger the cripple submitted for treatment, the greater the chance of success.

Sam listened earnestly, and once or twice asked to have



a sentence reread, as though to fix its meaning firmly in his mind. When the circular was finally returned to him he expressed his thanks gratefully enough, but forbore from comment. Sam was a boy of few words.

Mr. Gardner slowly turned the mane on his

horse's neck from side to side with his switch. He was thinking what a pity it was that little James Colston could not be benefited by some such place and treatment; but institutions were costly places, and these people were poor, ignorant, and far removed from the great world where science coped with disease and oftentimes conquered it.

The preacher was a man of limited experience himself, but he knew enough of the world to feel sure that much money would be requisite for such an adventure as taking a spinal cripple several hundred miles and giving him the benefit of skillful surgical treatment. He was sorry for Sam, who, he knew, took his brother's deformity sadly to heart.

It seemed almost a pity that Sam should have found the paper, and so become aware of a possible remedy entirely beyond his reach. The good man sighed as he gathered up his reins. He was so poor himself, so powerless to help his flock in many ways.

Sam stopped him.

"How far is this place, whar the school an' spensary is at?" the boy questioned.

Mr. Gardner made a rough calculation.

"Three or four hun'ed miles, I reckon, surely."

"How do you git thar?"

"By railroad. You take the cars over at Marketville, an' travel straight down country." Then, fancying he could read the boy's mind, the preacher added, not unkindly, "You're thinkin' o' Bunny, I know, Sam; but this sort o' doings costs a sight o' money, an' you ain't nothin' but a boy yet."

"Would it straighten out the baby's back like our'n?" Sam queried earnestly.

"I don't know. It might, an' then agin it might n't. 'T would depend on the way his back 's hurt, I reckon," was the cautious reply.

"Thar 'd be a chance, though?"

"Yes," said the minister, a trifle reluctantly,

"there 'd be a chance. But you can't do nothin', Sam, an' so I would n't pester about it if I was you. The money 's lackin', an' that scotches you. Folks are obleeged to have money for such as that. It 's mighty pitiful, but I allow 's the Lord knows best. Your hands is tied, anyway. An'," with a smile, "you ain't the baby's daddy, anyway."

With other words, kindly meant but discouraging, the preacher went on his way.

Sam stood looking after the retreating figures of horse and man for a moment, and then pursued his own way home. His brain teemed with thoughts and suggestions. Heretofore money had been a scant factor in Sam's life, and he knew so little of the world that he had no adequate conception of its importance.

He was accustomed to depend entirely upon his own body and brain, his thews, sinews, and wits, backed by his sturdy will, for the accomplishment of his purposes. His self-reliance was so great that, to him, these possessions seemed equal to any occasion.

On one thing he speedily resolved; if it were within the power of man to straighten poor little Bunny's crooked back it should be done, even if he, Sam, should have to carry the child pickaback all the way to that far-off city. Sam shrank from deformity with a strong-limbed, healthy animal's instinctive shrinking. His little brother's crookedness had been a pain to him for years, and the more so because he held himself, in a way, accountable for it.

The memory of the accident dwelt with him always. Bunny had been less than a year old, a straight and healthy baby, just growing into the accomplishment of creeping, in which every fibre of him delighted. One evening the mother had gone to milking, taking the two other children with her to help with the calves, and leaving Sam to mind the house and child. Sam had taken the little one from

his cradle, hitched up his frock so as to give his legs fair play, and set him to creeping about the floor.

After a little the dogs, down by the cowpen, had started a squirrel, chased it back toward the house, and treed it in a big walnut just outside the yard-fence. Hearing their music, Sam had dashed out, leaving the door open.

The dogs, wild with excitement, danced about and reared up on their hind legs against the tree-trunk, whimpering and barking. Up among the branches Sam had caught sight of the saucy little beast, curling his tail over his back and bidding his pursuers a proud defiance.

It had all proved too much for Sam. Forgetful of the baby, he had seized his father's old musket on the hooks above the door, and rushed to the assistance of the dogs.

The squirrel had proved wary, jumping from limb to limb, cleverly keeping on the

opposite side of the tree from danger. There had been nobody to head the quarry, so Sam had circled round many times before he secured the shot which brought his game tumbling from the tree to his feet, dead.

Sam had picked it up with exultation, and run gloriously back to the house with his gun on his shoulder and the dogs capering round him. Reaching the porch, he had been horrified to discover that the squirrel was not the only thing hurt on that hunt.



The baby lay in a huddle just beyond the porch, which was high in front, for it was built on the incline of the hill. It had been a bad fall for the little adventurer seeking new

countries on his hands and knees—a fall of fully three feet, with stony ground to receive him.

The child had not been crying, nor was he unconscious when Sam, frightened and remorseful, picked him up; but he looked queer, and Sam had run off with him to his mother in a panic.

No serious hurt had been discovered on the child's body—only an abrasion or two, and a bruise near the spine which was not regarded as serious. No one had thought of a doctor. The little fellow appeared as usual the next day. Working people have scant time for worrying, and a tumble from a porch had seemed no great matter.

But the result had been serious. After the fall the baby ceased to thrive as he had done. His little body became puny and frail and as he grew his spine developed a pitiable curve. The neighborhood doctor did not know how to treat the case, and so poor little James, or

Bunny, as he was called, had become a hump-back.

The horn sounded again, and Sam quickened his footsteps, jumping the rail-fence which bounded the yard. The house, a two-roomed log structure, stood in an open space, with a patch of garden-ground beyond, about the porch clumps of snow-balls, lilac and mockorange bushes which the dead mother had planted.

In a little armchair on the rough porch sat a child, with the tin dinner-horn in his hands and a complacent grin upon his countenance.

"I blowed fur you!" he asserted with delight. "An' Millie said I done it 'most as good as her. Did I? Did you hear me real loud?"

"Howlin' loud!" Sam answered, his eyes and voice softening. "'T was like men-folks was a-blowin'. A mocker out in the broomsedge 'lowed you was sassin' him, an' sassed

back pretty peart. You oughter hearn him. He was com'cal."

The child laughed, showing teeth like grains of rice. He was a pretty boy, despite his deformity, and had a merry, contented look, very different from the peevish, pained expression usual to affliction. He was still so young, and his home was so far away from many people, that he had not grown unpleasantly conscious of his deformity. All about him had been kind to the child, and even his selfish, indolent father would bestir himself when Bunny had one of his "bad turns." Sam regarded him as the apple of his eye.

With no need now to go to the store, Sam took his hoe into the garden after dinner, and began to chop among the vegetables. They did not really need attention, but Sam thought best when his hands were employed. He had plans of importance to decide upon.

The problem of straightening a crooked back, to Sam's ignorance, did not seem the

wonderful triumph of science that it really is. Something like it had even come within his own experience. He remembered well how badly bent and bruised a little apple tree in this very garden had been. His mother had put a stake by it, and bound the bent sapling to the support with care, leaving it thus a long time.

Sam glanced across the garden to where the tree stood, and laughed aloud in his joy. It had grown tall, straight, and thrifty.



That would be the way with Bunny when he should have been for a while under the care of people who knew how to stake and bind him.

"She'd look to me to 'tend to it, now I knows it can be done," he muttered. "She give Bunny to me whenst she was dying."

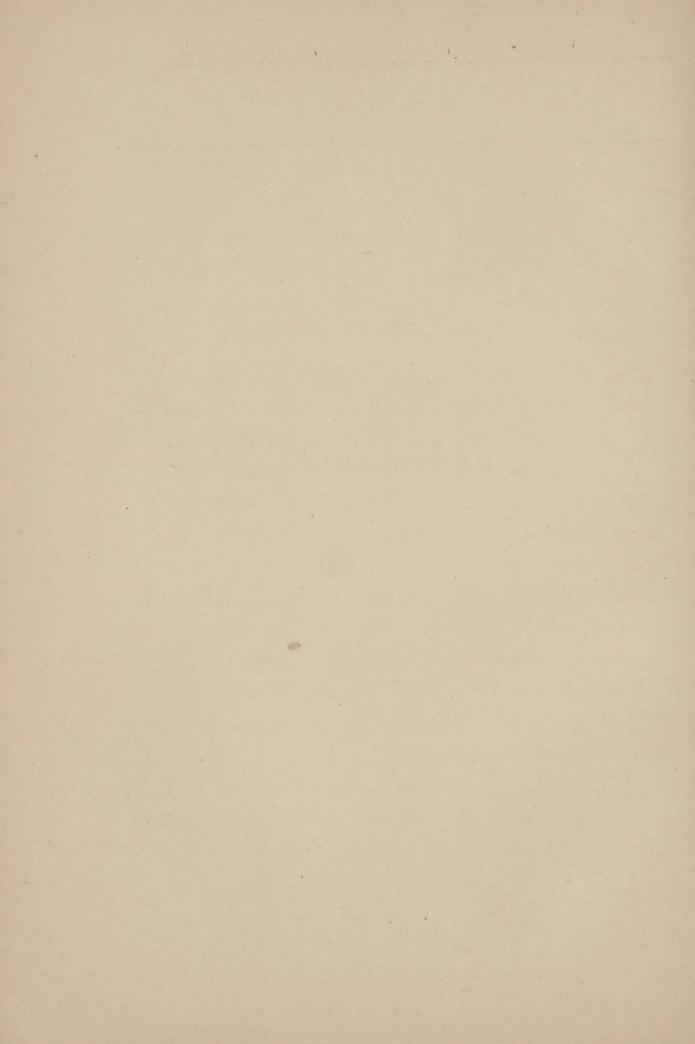
And so she had, passing over Millie, who was her eldest-born, and also her husband,

who might be supposed to be the natural recipient of such a charge. Dying eyes see clearly and instinctively recognize those fittest for responsibility.

Sam hoed and meditated until a creaking, lumbering sound, accompanied by shouts and expostulations reached him from the road beyond. Charlie was returning from the mill, and reasoning with his team after the manner of those who drive oxen.

Sam dropped his hoe in the onion-patch, and went out to meet him.

THE GREAT UNDERTAKING



CHAPTER II

THE GREAT UNDERTAKING

Before he could arrange any plan to take Bunny to the hospital where spinal deformities were treated, Sam must have a talk with Charlie. The idea of consulting his father never crossed his mind. He was too much used to seeing his father shift his natural responsibilities to other shoulders for the proper relation ever to have existed between them. His only hope about his father was that he would not hinder.

Charlie was different. He and Charlie had pulled in double harness, so to speak, ever since their mother died.

"Hello, bud!" he hailed cheerily, as the wagon lumbered up. "How 'd you make out grindin'? We all 'lowed you 'd rented out the

SAM

miller, an' sot up for yo'se'f, you stayed so long."

Charlie laughed, and sent a glance sky-ward.

"'Tain't sundown yet," he observed, "an' steers ain't lightnin'. Thar was lots o' grist ahead o' me, too, an' that kep' me back. Let down the bars, Sam, an' come on an' help take out an' feed. I've done hollered all my wind away, an' I'm hongry as a hound puppy besides. Unpin the yoke yo' side."

"Any news stirrin'?" Sam asked, as he released the off steer.

"Terry's trial 's sot for this week, an' the mill-folks talked 'bout'n that mostly. Is dad in the house?"

"I reckon so. He mostly is."

"Sheriff Austin come to mill soon arter I got thar," Charlie pursued, "an' he 'lowed he'd be by here arter breakfast to-morrow to work a jury notice on dad, an' tote him straight off to the cote-house to serve. Most

o' the fellows about dodges jury in layin'-by-corn time."

"Did Austin send word to dad by you?"

"No, he did n't," laughed Charlie. "He 'lowed I wa'n't to jar my lips to him 'bout it. Said dad mout make up his mind 'bout Terry to-night a-purpose to dodge. Said he could n't scuffle 'bout the deestric' arter jurors, like a hawk arter chickens. He 'lowed we-all mout make out to spar' dad to the kentry a few days. An' I 'lowed back we 'd try. Austin 's comin' with a team to head off rheumatism. Cute, ain't he?"

"He 's takin' a sight o' trouble," observed Sam.

"He's paid extry for it. Terry's got all-fired keen lawyers who ain't gwine to risk snatched-up jurors on the cote-house green. Austin's pickin' men up outside. I wish we-all could go stead'n dad. The trial'll be a buster!"

Terry was a man in the neighborhood who

had been indicted for manslaughter. His case excited much local interest, and at any other time Sam would have been greatly interested in the gossip about the impending trial. Being preoccupied now, he simply regarded the news in its relation to his own plans. It would be convenient that his father should not be at home for a few days.

After supper Sam got his brother out under the walnut tree and disclosed his intentions. At first Charlie was skeptical as to the possibility of a cure, and disposed to ridicule the idea.

It took the elder boy fully half an hour of persuasion and argument, illustrated by the case of the apple tree and the pictures on the circular, to get him to look at the matter from the proper point of view. Then practical difficulties presented themselves.

"How 'll you git him thar?" Charlie demanded, feeling that he had Sam at advantage. "You ain't got no money to ride on the

SAM

train, an' it 's a long way off, you say. How 'll you travel?"

Sam rolled over on his back and kicked up his legs in the moonlight, slapping them resoundingly.

"Them fellows have toted me arter squir'els an' rabbits a sight o' miles befo' now," he declared cheerfully, "an' I look to 'em to tote me down yonder. What 's to hinder?"



"Bun 's to hinder. He 'll git wearied out ridin' pickaback.

It 'll take you consid'r'ble time to pat the grit that far. He 'll drap off'n yo' back like a ripe acorn, he will."

Sam chuckled.

"You ain't got good sense, Charlie," he said reprovingly. "I ain't 'lowin' to kill the baby a-curin' him. I'm agwine to haul him in his'n wagon. It's strong an' runs easy. We'll have to tote his bundle o' clo'es an' a clean shirt for me an' some victuals. When we've eat up what we start with I 'll work for folks along the road an' git more. See?"

Charlie did, and out of large ignorance and inexperience decided that the scheme was good. More than that, he fell into it with enthusiasm, and volunteered to go, too, and help with the "horse work."

It took Sam another half an hour to drive him from this position. He had feared from the very first that Charlie would want to go, too.

"You know what dad is," he expostulated earnestly. "If he 'lows any work 'll fall on him, he 'll put his foot down an' sw'ar the thing ain't no 'count, an' we-all shan't go. He 've got the power, too, bein' we air his'n till we come o' age. Millie can't stand up to everything. She 's got all she can do now, cookin' an' washin' an' mendin' for we-all. You stay,

Charlie, an' hold our een' o' the log up till I gits back. Dad won't let us both go."

"Dad ain't gwine to let ary one o' us go!" Charlie declared. "He 'll pull agin you, you 'll see."

"But you'll pull with me, won't you, bud?" Sam entreated. "Now I'm addled 'long o' the notion Bun mout be cured, I can't git no rest till I try fur it. I'm 'stracted to try! Look here, Charlie, I gits haunted, times, thinkin' if it had n't been for my leavin' him to crawl off'n the porch that time an' cripple hese'f, Bun mout'r been straight like we-all. I 'm 'bleeged to take him down thar; I'm 'bleeged to help him git shut o' the harm I done him!"

His tone was passionate; his breath came sobbingly, and his rough hands shook as they clasped his knees. Charlie was moved by the reflex of his emotion, and stretched out his own brown paw and laid it on his brother's.

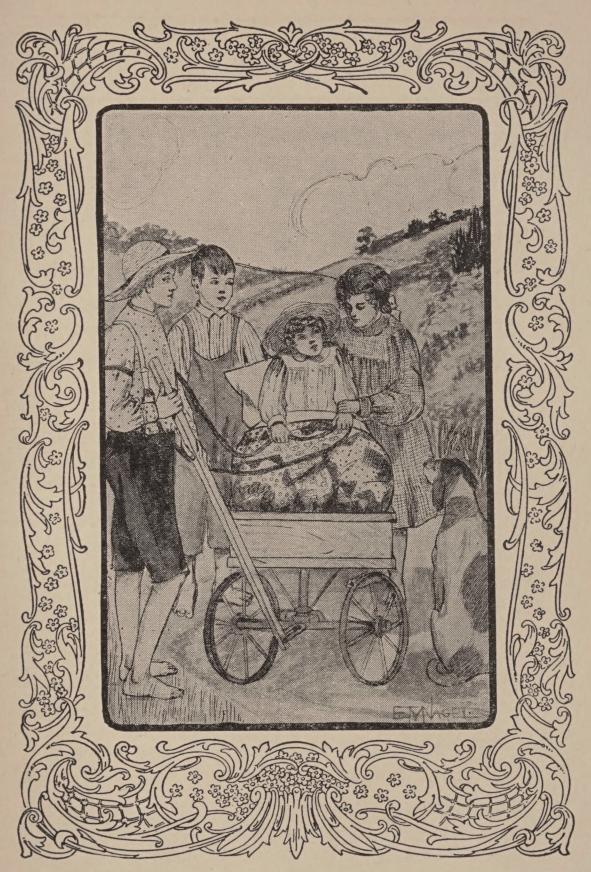
"I'm with you, bud, anyhow you choose to fix it," he said.

Recognizing the strategic value of the sheriff's visit, Sam forbore to proffer his request to take Bunny to "see a smart doctor whar could cure crooked backs" until his father was in a whirl of nervous excitement over the unusual demand upon his energies.

Flattered on the one side by the sheriff's cunning importunities, and beset by Sam on the other, the father, probably not clearly understanding the boy's proposition, declared irritably that he might do as he liked; he—Colston—"could n't be pestered whenst he had important business to 'tend to."

When the sheriff had driven away with the father, Sam flapped his arms against his sides in imitation of a rooster, and crowed triumphantly. Then he dragged a stout little wooden wagon from under the porch, greased its axles, and set vigorously about preparations for his own departure.

In less than an hour the little cart had been stored with a change or two of clothing, a tin



The expedition was ready to move.

SAM

pail of provisions, a pillow, and a bedquilt. Bunny had been carefully washed and dressed, and the expedition was ready to move.

At the last, Millie, a loving-hearted girl, broke down, and cried out that Sam was a fool to suppose any doctor could cure the child.

"He 'll git hurted worse!" she sobbed, hysterically. "I can't 'gree to let him go. Stay with sister, Bunny! Say you 'd ruther stay at home with sister."

But Bunny was wholly in favor of going. He was much fonder of Sam than he was of his sister, and delighted at the thought of a journey. He bobbed up and down in his little wagon gleefully. "Good-by, sister!" he chirped merrily. "You take keer o' my chickens an' my puppy till I git back. Git up, horsey!" and he whistled blithely and cracked his little whip.

Both boys laughed.

"Thar, now," spoke Sam, "he wants to go his own self. He's mine, anyhow—mammy gin him to me. An' dad 'lowed I mout take

him. I'll fetch him back all right, Millie; don't you fret."

Then he kissed his sister affectionately, shook hands with Charlie, seized the wagontongue, and set forth on his journey.

His plan was to circle around Marketville, and strike the railway farther along. The preacher had said that this railway would take a person down to the coast city, and Sam proposed to keep near and follow it.

The largeness of the undertaking did not trouble him. Ignorance is spared many anxieties, and Sam felt sure he should work out all right. He knew the name of the railway, and could ask questions. He was in excellent humor with himself. To have started was a great thing. And with parental consent, too, so that he need not feel like a runaway! Sam smiled complacently, and stepped out briskly.

He avoided the turning which led to the village. Bunny who was familiar with that part of the way, called him to order here.

"You're gwine wrong, Sam," he protested.
"That's the turn to Aunt Millie's. I knows it by the broke-off cedar at the fork. You'll git lost if you don't mind."

"No, I won't, honey," Sam replied. "We-all ain't gwine to Aunt Millie's now. We 're gwine further."

"Whar to?"

"To town, whar heaps o' houses is. An' pretty things an' marbles an' candy an' sugar dogs."

Sam sought to make the prospect alluring by mention of things Bun had seen at the village store and admired.

The child was content enough, although he asked many questions. He preferred Sam to any living being, and was amused with his journey through the woods, and the stop at a spring for the midday meal. Sam let him walk a little when his legs became cramped and told him interesting things to beguile the journey.

Late in the afternoon, on emerging from a skirt of woods, the children beheld the railway. Sam drew a breath of relief. He was beginning to fear he had made too wide a detour and should miss it.

The railway emerged from a cutting, stretched away across a wide pine-barren, and entered another woods ahead. Sam made his way down to it, and trotted beside the track. The scrub had been cleared away for some distance on either side of the roadbed, and the little wagon could run beside the low embankment.

Bunny was amused at first, but presently the jolting over the rough ground made his back ache. He endured the pain as long as he could, being a plucky little fellow; but by and by he began to whimper and complain that he was tired and wanted his supper and to go to bed.

Sam comforted him as well as he could, and eased him with the pillow and quilt. Then he

gave him a cake Millie had put into the pail, and moved forward more carefully.

The roadbed was close to them, and soon the rails began to vibrate, with a low, singing noise which attracted the boys' attention. Bunny stopped fretting to listen—it sounded pretty.

"What's singin' so easy, Sam?" he questioned. "I don't see no bird nowhar."

Sam did not either, and said so. They were unaccustomed to railroads, and ignorant that the sound they admired was caused by the oncoming of a train. It was a surprise to them, therefore, when a long freight train dashed into sight, coming straight toward them, with its headlight aflame, and a mighty howl of escaping steam.

Sam cheered and waved his hand in response to the trainmen's greeting, but Bunny, who had never seen an engine so close before, was frightened almost out of his wits, and cried lustily, refusing to believe the danger

4-Sam [51]

past, or himself unhurt, even when the train was out of sight. He called Sam names, when his brother tried to coax him out of his terror, and was as naughty as a wofully tired little boy could be.

"I want to go home!" he wailed. "Millie's done cooked supper, an' we-all ain't got nothin' fitten to eat. I want my cradle, Sam—does you hear me? Take me right home, I tell you!"

Sam coaxed and soothed, promising all sorts of things provided Bunny would cease crying. Finally he got the child quieted, and took time to look about them.

They were in a pine woods, lonely and deserted; the tree-stems stood close, their dark branches interlacing and shutting out the sky. Nowhere was there a sign of human habitation; and but for the presence of the railway the children might have fancied themselves the only living creatures on the surface of the earth.

SAM

Sam pushed on wearily, acutely conscious of the subdued sobbing which occasionally broke forth from the little wagon. The twilight deepened, and the woods were very still. They were descending, and there was a good path beside the track.

Presently the moon rose and an opening

appeared among the trees, where a small clearing had

been made. Rejoicing in the increased light, Sam turned aside to it and found that it contained a log cabin,

used formerly for a camp by railroad hands. There was a spring near it, revealed by the gurgling of water.

The cabin was deserted, but none the less welcome for that. It would give good shelter for the night. Bunny was not used to sleeping out of doors.

As Sam pulled the little wagon into the [53]

space before the door a rushing, pattering sound, accompanied by a heavy panting, drew nearer from behind them, and as he faced around to discover its cause, something big and black precipitated itself against Sam and almost knocked him over.

"It's a bear!" shrieked Bunny in a panic, and straightway he began to howl more lustily than ever.

Sam laughed aloud. His hands were on a familiar collar, and he could see well enough who the intruder was, even before the joyful bark of his own dog, Trevor, rang in his ears.

"Stop yer noise, Bun," he said, blithely. "It's only ole Trevor, an' he ain't going to eat you. I fastened him up befo' we-all started, but he must'r scratched out an' tracked us. Down, Trevor! down, ole fellow!"

Having brought matches, Sam speedily kindled a fire on the wide hearth. Then they brought in some armfuls of the dry pineneedles with which the ground outside was

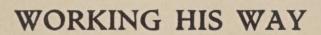
SAM

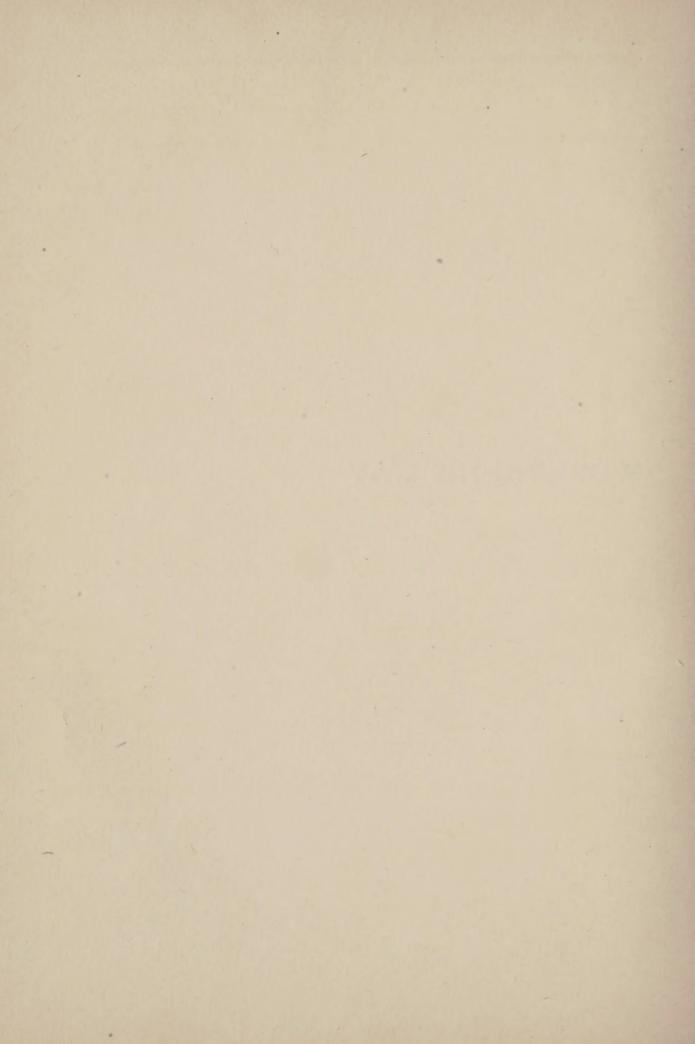
covered; got water from the spring, and housed his wagon and freight.

He warmed a bottle of coffee which Millie had stowed away in the wagon, and portioned out the food he had left, reserving a part for breakfast. Then he fed his little brother, loosened his clothing and put him to bed, snugly folded about with the bedquilt.

The child, made comfortable, dropped off to sleep contentedly.







CHAPTER III

WORKING HIS WAY

But Sam could not readily follow the example. He was excited by his adventure, and overwearied by the day's exertion and responsibility.

The appearance of the dog had alarmed him, causing him to fancy that his father might have returned, repented of his permission, and set out to reclaim them. Then he remembered that there had been scarcely time for pursuit.

Even while he listened for possible footsteps fatigue overcame him, and he crept to Bunny's side and slept.

Early next morning Trevor began to whimper and scratch at the door. Sam, half-asleep and not quite certain of his whereabouts, scrambled to his feet and let the dog out. It was a lovely morning, fresh and dewy, with a soft veil of mist lightly lifting as the sun rose.

Trevor bounced about, wagging his tail and yelping joyously; then he sped away to the spring and lapped up the water eagerly. Two cows, also quenching their morning thirst, disturbed by the dog's onslaught, moved hastily.

Sam, familiar with the midsummer vagrancy of cows, could tell that they had not been milked the previous evening, and rightly conjectured that they had strayed beyond legitimate bounds.

Knowing well that the owners of the cows would be very glad to have them milked under such circumstances, he glanced at Bunny, who was still sleeping, and sallied forth with his bucket.

"It jus' ruins cows to go unmilked," he meditated, squatting down beside one of the animals and drawing forth the milk with accustomed fingers.

Still his conscience would let him take only a pint of milk from each cow, and the milk-distended udders showed no difference. He wanted none for himself, he thought; only a little for Bunny's breakfast, and some to take with them in the bottle. The child was used to his cup of milk for the morning meal.

Sam placed the bucket in the spring to cool while he looked about for blackberry bushes. At one side of the clearing he found a patch, and filled the crown of his hat with the ripe fruit.

"I wish I knowed whar them cows belong, an' I'd drive 'em home," he observed to Trevor, as he passed them returning to the house. "It's mighty ill-convenient for folks's cows to stray. G'lang, madam! G'lang home! Whoop-ee!"

He stooped for pine cones, and began to pelt the cows with these harmless missiles.

"Whenst they gits started with the notion somebody's behind'em, they gen'ally keeps on home tharselves," he reasoned, out of full experience of cow nature and methods. "They feel druv plumb till they git to co'-pen. Thar," as the animals disappeared among the bushes, "I reckon they 'll keep on now, an' that 'll holp some. Thar milker will likely be callin' somewhar."

The boys had a merry breakfast, and Bunny, refreshed by his long sleep and the good milk, chattered like a blackbird.

"Whar be we goin', Sammy, anyhow?" he demanded.

"Down the kentry," replied Sam, warily.

He had decided not yet to tell the child their destination nor the object of the journey. Bunny was such an ignorant baby that anything unusual frightened him.

"If he 'lowed anything was to be did to his back I'd never git him for'ard a step," Sam reasoned. "He 'd be skeered nigh to death."

"Who lives down thar?" Bunny wanted to know as his brother made him comfortable for the start. "Whose folks be we gwine to see? Dad's or mammy's?"

"Nuther one," replied Sam, trotting forward. "The folks we air gwine to see ain't no blood kin to we-all, but they 're ourn all the same. I reckon they 're eve'ybody's, like God be. They 'll be pow'ful proud to see us, honey, an' arter we 've stopped awhile, we 'll skedaddle back home agin. This is ourn 'broad, yo's an' mine. Don't you like it?"

Being neither hungry, weary, nor in pain, Bunny graciously testified to satisfaction with Sam and the world in general. Trevor's advent had delighted him, after the scare of his arrival had passed. It seemed more natural to have their dog with them. Trevor always followed when Sam dragged Bunny about in the woods at home.

He whistled to the dog merrily, and began to sing to himself a camp-meeting hymn which Millie had taught him.

For several miles the way, still descending,

led through the pine woods. Then the country opened. The railway, curving to the left, passed through another open covered with broom-sedge and scrub, and threw itself across a river by means of a graceful iron bridge. At the river Sam pulled up and glanced about for a boat. Seeing none, he proceeded to examine the bridge.

The mountain method of crossing a stream in summer "by dog ferry"—that is, wading—was out of the question here. The banks were too steep, and the broad stream looked deep as well as rapid.

This was Sam's first railroad bridge, and he had a very low opinion of it. It seemed inadequate and only half-finished.

"Must'r been skeerce o' timber," was his comment to Bunny. "They ain't put down no floor. How in the name o' sense does folks an' horses look to git across on the j'ists?"

Bunny scrambled out and reconnoitered also.

SAM

"They'd drap th'ou," he decided, "an' horses'd break thar legs. I's 'feared."

"What o'?" Sam demanded.

His plan was to carry his little brother across on his back, and then come back for the wagon. The crossties looked close enough together to hold up the wheels.

"'Feared o' the water!" the child retorted, backing away from it. "Thar's such a lot, an' it's in such a hurry! It skeers me!"



"No, it don't!" coaxed Sam, bending his back invitingly. "Git on my back an' shut yo' eyes up tight. I'll take keer o' you."

Bunny sat himself down on the ground obstinately.

"I sha'n't!" he declared. "Thar ain't no flo', an' you'll step th'ou'. I jes' hates it!"

Then, remembering how the train had [65]

dashed upon them the previous evening, he added:

"Somethin' mout ketch we-all. Trains is so sly an' sneakin'. We-all mout git knocked off an' mashed. I ain't gwine nary step!"

Poor little man! His days were being filled with strange and unaccustomed things, for which he could see no reason. He was frightened and perplexed, and thought Sam ought not make him do things for which he had no mind.

"You's mean to me!" he cried out, pettishly. "I'll tell Millie an' dad!"

Sam moved the wagon aside and sat himself down patiently to coax. It did not occur to him to pick up the child and bear him across willy-nilly. They always humored the baby; so Sam assured him there was no danger, appealed to Bunny's manhood, and drew alluring pictures of the joys awaiting them on the other side.

Even Trevor took a hand in the blandish[66]

ments, jumping on the bridge a little way and then jumping back, barking gayly, and evidently giving them a lead over.

Bunny was tiny and frail, but he possessed a will of his own, the strength of which had been increased by humoring. Planting his hands on his shrunken little knees, he set his brother at defiance. It was a family adage that "the baby was little, but he rode with a big whip."

Sam was about at his wits' end when the rails began to ring again, but with a lighter sound than the vibration of the previous evening. The children turned in the direction of the sound, and Sam rose to his feet.

A handcar, with two section men on it, swung round the curve and came toward them, going slowly, as the men were in no apparent hurry to get to their work. As they came abreast of him, Sam hailed and the car stopped.

"Hello, kids!" the man at the crank cried

5-Sam

[67]

jovially. "What're you doin' down here on our track? Does yer mammy know you're gaddin'?"

"This here road yourn?" Sam inquired with interest.

"We, us's an' company's," the fellow replied, with a laugh. "Don't it suit you?"

"Yer bridge don't!" Sam retorted. "'Tain't got no flo'! My leetle brother's afeard to cross it. Why'n't you lay some planks down whilst you was buildin'? 'T would be a sight mo' handier for folks."

The men grinned.

"So 't would, sonny," they agreed. "But you see the comp'ny wa'nt settin' out to be agreeable. We-all mout report the public not satisfied with the 'commodations pervided, an' hollerin' for planks." They laughed loudly. "Whar's the chap thet's 'feared? Let him stan' out, so we-all kin git his measure."

Sam moved aside and Bunny rose slowly to his feet, pushing his hat back so that he

might get a better view of this queer wagon. The men exchanged glances and stopped joking.

"Pore leetle chappie!" muttered one. "He's pow'ful bad off, to be sho'." Then he softened his gruff voice, and addressed the child kindly: "So you're 'feared o' the bridge, little un?"

Bunny nodded. He was not at all shy. "Sam was gwine to tote me, but I would n't let him," he remarked calmly.

"Would you be 'feared to cross on this?" the man asked, stamping his foot on the car flooring and leaning over the plank. "It 's mighty solid."

"Go 'cross in you-all's wagon?"

"Yes, siree!"

"An' Sam too?"

"Ef agreeable."

"An' Trevor?" indicating the dog, who stood with sharp ears cocked at attention.

"The mo', the merrier."

"All right. I reckon I kin make out to stan' it that-a-way."

His tone was dubious still, but he allowed Sam to lift him on the car. Sam looked up at the men gratefully.

"He's sp'iled some, the baby is," he explained in a low tone. "Bein' 'flicted, we-all could n't never cross him none. I'll be obleeged to you for holpin' me across. I 've got to kyar him a good piece further on t'other side."

The men helped him get his things on the car and settle Bunny on his lap.

"How does you gen'ally cross?" one inquired, taking it for granted that the children lived in the neighborhood, and were going somewhere on a visit.

"With Bun?" questioned Sam, warily. "I ain't never fetched him this way befo'."

Finding that the children were going as far as the next station—which, to Sam, seemed a safe thing to admit—the men took them

down to the limit of their section, and at parting, pointed out a short cut across the fields which would be better wheeling for the little wagon.

"We'll be along here agin 'bout the end o' the week," the crank-man said, "an' if you're aimin' to git back you mout look out for us."

Sam thanked him earnestly.

"That's all right," said the man. "I've got a whole drove o' kids at home. None o' 'em ain't 'flicted, though, thank God! Here, baby," diving for his dinner-pail, "here's a piece o' pie for you. My wife 's a master hand at pie."

Bunny accepted the huge piece of blackberry pie graciously, and waved his hand to the men as long as they were in sight. He was in high spirits, and had enjoyed his smoooth, joltless ride. The car propelled by man-power had not alarmed him like those drawn by a fiery engine. One was understandable, the other an unknown monster.

"If we-all jus' had a wagon like that, we [71]

could git whar we're gwine in a hurry," he chattered to Sam, as they looked about for a shady place to eat their pie and bread and milk. "Could n't you borry one, Sam?"

"Nary time," Sam laughed. "Them 'ar cars is built jus' for railroad folks, an' kyar'nt be borryed nohow. They gin us a good lift, though, an' we kin camp a while an' eat. Here 's a shady place under this big sycamore. An' I 'low thar 's a spring in that bottom. You rest here whilst I run an' see. Don't let Trevor dab his nose in the victuals, smellin' round."

But Trevor was otherwise engaged. He had discovered an interesting hole in a bank, and was sitting down before it meditating.

He was a young dog, with more curiosity than discretion, and he had never been so far afield before. There were numberless things in the material world Trevor had still no acquaintance with. This was one of them.

He cocked his head on one side, and nosed

about it. The bank was full of tiny perforations beside this central hole. It must be the burrow of some animal, possibly a ground-hog.

Trevor smote the bank with his paw, and then listened. There was movement within, and a whirring noise; he smote it again. Louder movement and a more continuous humming.

Plainly this was the abode of small game of some sort, such as it behooved a dog who thought well of himself to find out all about. That murmuring inside was a challenge. Trevor pricked up his ears, yelped a shrill defiance, and fell to digging furiously.

The dirt flew right and left, the dog was getting excited. Bunny, from beside his wagon, looked on with eagerness and wished for Sam to hurry. Surely it must be a ground-hog!

Something smelled sweet and alluring to Trevor when he thrust his nose down, and he dug faster than ever. Suddenly he gave a howl of anguish, and rolled backward, smiting the air and rubbing his muzzle with his paws. He had dug up a colony of mud-wasps.

Thick and fast, in squads, in regiments, the insects swarmed out and about the dog, planting their stings in the poor creature's skin. Trevor rolled and howled, and fought with his paws. The atmosphere seemed alive with furious insects, and he knew not which way to turn.

Bunny laughed until the tears came, albeit he was sorry for Trevor, and between paroxysms yelled for Sam to come to the rescue. The dog looked so funny, rolling about.

Sam came running from the hollow with his pail full of water, dashed to the rescue, and emptied the contents of his pail over the combatants. The onslaught was so sudden and the splash so great that hostilities were suspended for a moment, during which the dog bounced to his feet, tucked his tail between his A few of the more belligerent members of the swarm pursued him, stinging where they could; but Trevor knew what to do now. He sped straight for the river, where he took to water, otter-fashion, immersing himself completely, and rubbing his afflicted nose against the cool pebbles at the bottom.

Sam moved camp at once. "They 'll be arter us, next," he observed. "Trevor's stirred'em up most pow'ful."

"They stirred he up to pay back," grinned Bunny unfeelingly. "He sp'iled thar house, an' they sp'iled him's nose for smellin'. Look at he!" as the dog joined them dejectedly, in obedience to a whistle from Sam. "Don't he look sorry an' com'cal?"

Sam examined his favorite, then mixed up some soft red mud and applied it to the stings, which were swelling. It would take the soreness out.

"Quit laughin', Bun," he expostulated.

"The creeter's sufferin'. You oughter feel sorry for him. I hate things to be mocked at what's in pain."

"I ain't mockin' him!" cried Bunny indignantly. "I 's jus' laughin' 'cause he swelled so lopsided. I saved him some o' my milk, I did. Here't is in the cup now. Trevor knows I ain't done him no harm. Don't you, Trevor?"

The dog tilted his lopsided countenance at an angle which permitted him to regard Bunny over the swollen rim of one eye. The stings had ceased smarting, and he was glad of his dinner; so he leered at the boys so ludicrously that even Sam's notions of sympathetic kindness were upset, and he laughed as heartily as Bunny.

"Thar now!" crowed Bunny, pointing a rebuking finger; "who's mockin' now?"

"Stings quit hurtin' whenst they begin to swell," explained Sam. "He ain't in pain now. Come on, both on you. We mus' be travelin'."

As evening drew on, they stopped at a house where they saw an elderly woman knitting on the porch, and Sam proposed to chop wood and milk the cows for her in exchange for some food and permission to sleep in an outhouse.

The woman eyed him suspiciously, and asked a good many questions, which Sam answered as well as he could. When Bunny was lifted from the wagon and staggered a little by reason of his



legs being cramped, her face softened.

"That thar ain't nothin' but a baby," she observed. "An' 'flicted, too! Whar air you totin' him to? I'll be bounded you 've runned away from your folks."

Sam smiled queerly, and pointed to the

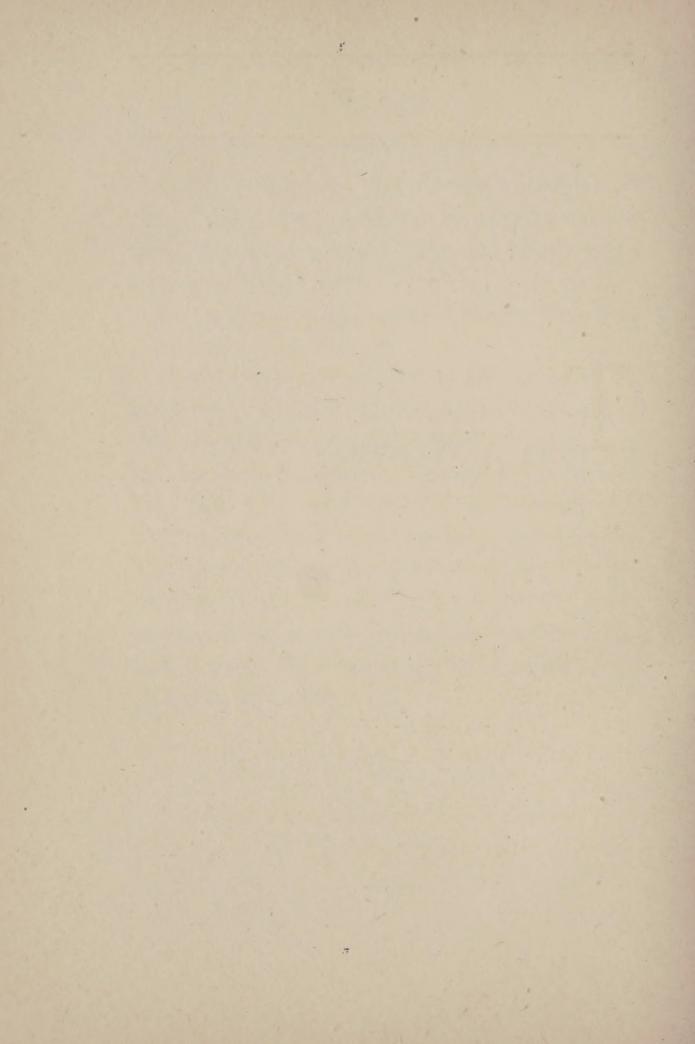
"With him?" he questioned significantly. "Runaways don't cumber tharselves this-away. My mammy 's dead, an' dad knows whar I'm kyarin' him to."

"Why n't yer dad come hisse'f, if you're gwine to see kin-folks?"

"Dad's hung on a jury, an' mebbe won't be loose fur a week," Sam explained pleasantly. "He lets me tote the baby roun'. I takes keer on him mostly anyhow. Mammy gin him to me. Kin I do them jobs for the victuals?"

"Tote the child in the house first," said the woman, "an' shove you-all's little wagon under the porch out'n the way. I'll git you the milk-piggin, an' the moolie cow down by them drawbars is mine. The axe is at the woodpile. I'm gwine to git supper."

A CRUEL REVELATION



CHAPTER IV

A CRUEL REVELATION

HE woman kept Sam and Bunny with her all night, saying that the child was too weakly-looking to sleep in an outhouse. She let Sam help her through her morning work, and she fed all the little party well, including Trevor, whose adventures with the bees amused her greatly. She filled up the pail with food, and the bottle with milk.

"That 'll last you twill you git to your kinfolks' house, I reckon," she said. Then, glancing sharply at Sam as she fastened the lid of the pail, she added, "You know your way, don't you?"

"I reckon I do," Sam answered readily.

"Well, that's a blessin'. I'm new to these

parts myself, an' could n't 'a' showed you if you did n't. Don't you trot along too fast an' yank that child about. 'Flicted folks ain't lusty, like you be. Be studdy an' keerful now, an' don't let nothin' happen to him."

She stroked Bunny's cheek, kissed him, and slipped a few June apples under his pillow.

Sam promised all she required, smiling to himself as he did so. Had not he taken care of Bunny for years, day and night? And was he not even now straining every nerve to undo the one bit of harm he had let come near him?

Of course, he would look out for Bunny.

For several days they went on quietly, gradually leaving the hills behind them and getting into a more thickly settled region. Sam kept the railway in sight, but he no longer hugged the track as he had done at first. He was becoming expert in making cross-cuts and avoiding bends.

They had no more rides on handcars, but several times they were given long lifts in wagons. They fared very well for food. Most people will give children a meal even without remuneration, and Sam was a handy boy, always ready and willing to cut wood, fetch water, or rub down horses for the people who befriended them.

They slept where they could, in beds or in the hay or corn-fodder, as it might chance. Sam always contrived to make Bunny comfortable with the pillow and quilt, even when they were obliged to camp out. The weather was warm, and for the most part dry.

Bunny had become quite reconciled to their vagrant existence, and had ceased talking of the home people, and teasing Sam to take him back to them. He was often troublesome, weary, and cross; but Sam was accustomed to humoring him.

The strangers they met were, in the main, kind to them, moved thereto by the child's misfortune. Bunny wondered why people looked at him pitifully and made remarks about him.

[83]

He did not always like the things they said, nor relish being called names—"a cripple" and "spine-complainted." He often thought people had no manners, and told Sam so roundly.

He knew that he was not quite like Sam or Charlie—not tall nor strong; but then he was only six years old, and his sister Millie had always told him that he would "grow like a runt pig, arter he got age on him."

He had no real understanding wherein lay the difference, nor of his own marred appearance. He had never seen himself full length.

There was a little mirror at home, framed in wood, which his father used when he shaved and Millie when she combed her hair. It hung above his reach; but he had seen his own face in it numberless times. Only his face, however, for the glass was small.

Until he had started on this journey Bunny had seen only people who were accustomed to his appearance, and too kind to comment

upon it. Now everybody they met made remarks.

With the new sights and novel experiences, Bunny's mind was expanding, too. He began to put questions to Sam which the elder boy found it hard to evade. "What makes me dif'ent, Sammy?" he queried. "Folks do like I was. They say, 'Po' leetle creetur!' whenst they look at me, like I were sick or silly. I ain't sick nor foolish, an' they ought n't talk that-a-way. 'Tain't manners."

During a visit to his aunt once Bunny had seen an idiot—one "struck silly," to use the local term. Folks had said, "Po' creeter!" he remembered, as the afflicted one passed. Instinctively he resented the term as applied to himself; the association made it obnoxious. He knew himself to be anything but "silly."

Sam looked down at him lovingly, and patted his shoulder.

"You're leetle, you see," he responded, "an' you git so tired! Folks think you ain't nothin'

but a baby, an' whenst they git wind o' yo' havin' no mammy, they feels sorry fur you."

His explanation sounded lame and inadequate in his own ears, and he was more troubled than surprised to find Bunny sweep it aside with a contemptuous, "Shucks!"

"Lot o' 'em dunno nothin' 't all 'bout weall's mammy," quoth he vigorously, "an' weall don't tell 'em nothin', nuther! Some on 'em talk 'bout'n us, an' don't never jar thar lips to us. You can't fool a possum, Sam. 'Tain't wuth while to try. Do bein' sorry fur me make folks call me a humpback?"

The pertinence of the query staggered Sam.

"They ain't got no better sense!" he said angrily.

Bunny's eyes twinkled with shrewdness.

"What's a humpback?" he demanded.

Sam was driven into a corner. He pushed back his hat and rubbed his hair about with

hesitating fingers. He could think of no explanation that would not be mortifying.

"A humpback ain't strong an' big like other chil'en," he finally evaded. "A humpback 's puny an' weakly."

"Won't I git over it?"

The little voice was very wistful.

"You ain't but six ye'rs ole. Look at me! I 'm fo'teen, an' that 's more'n twice as ole, an' I ain't lusty like a man. Lots o' big fellows at home could double me right up with one hand. Simon Jinkins could any time. Whenst you git age to you, you 'll brace up an' stiffen. You're a runt pig now, you know, an' that sort turns out fus' cut heap o' times."

This view of the case was familiar, therefore more comforting than would have been a new one. A child is easily satisfied, and for the moment Bunny let his mind be diverted by the natural objects around to which Sam eagerly invited his attention.

But he was destined ere long to realize wherein lay the difference between himself and others.

They had been on the roads more than a week, and so far had been blessed with warmth and sunshine. Now a change came. For half a day it lowered, with a steady banking of clouds from horizon to zenith, and a faraway mutter of thunder, which gradually drew nearer.

Toward evening a wind swept down from the mountains, slanting the broom-sedge and scrub pines in the pastures, and rasping together the long blades of the Indian corn. Sam cast a weather eye aloft and began to hasten. A wetting would be bad for Bunny.

"It's comin' on to rain hard, Bun!" he called. "Tuck down under the quilt good an' hold tight. I'm gwine to gallop."

The storm neared. The wind brought with it a smell of the rain that was just behind. Lightning leaped athwart the sky in sharp,

jagged flashes, and the rattle of the thunder sounded ominously close. Trevor uneasily slunk up close to the wagon, his tail between his legs. Sam, running at speed, looked about for shelter.

Some distance ahead was a cluster of houses about a railway station, and nearer, by several hundred yards, stood a neat frame house in a small yard. As the children neared it, rain began to fall in heavy, pattering drops, and



Sam, in too great a hurry for ceremony, opened the yard-gate and ran in with his wagon.

The dog sped up the path ahead, and crawled under the porch for shelter. A woman who had seen them from a window, opened the door, and asked Sam what he wanted.

"My little brother 's delicate," he said politely. "Kin we-all shelter till the rain's over?"

The woman nodded and opened the door wider, watching as Sam put Bunny, bundled up in a quilt, on the porch and emptied his wagon.

"I'm obleeged to you, ma'am," he said, as he brought the child inside.

The woman led the way into a room on one side of the little entrance-hall, and gave the boys seats. She resumed her own place beside the window, and sewed while she plied Sam with questions. She was young and rather pretty, and, as she presently told Sam, was the wife of a section-master named Minter.

The room was well furnished, and Bunny, established on Sam's lap and still folded in his quilt, thought it the prettiest place he ever was in. The cheap lithographs on the walls, the gaudy vases on the mantel, the scarlet mats on the bureau, under toilet bottles with roses and humming-birds painted on them, were all, to

the little mountaineer, visions of exquisite beauty.

Never in his life, not even in the village store, had he seen such beautiful things; and his soul was filled with delight, and a great longing to examine them all more closely.

Most of all was Bunny attracted by the large mirror which surmounted the bureau, in which he could see a portion of the room reflected, and also half of his brother's face. His eyes danced with eagerness, and he lifted himself on Sam's knee, stretching his neck like a pranking pullet. This maneuver brought into view the top of his own straw-colored head, and set him quivering with eagerness.

"Manners," as taught by Millie, forbade his making remarks to the stranger about her possessions, but he could not forbear an ecstatic whisper to Sam.

"Hiest up yo' head, an' tu'n it roun'. I mus' see if all o' you kin come in right squar'."

Sam did as he was bidden, casting a glance

out of the corner of his eye at the lookingglass wherein to him Bunny's little pale face was visible. He nudged Bunny to quiet him.

Presently a couple of children, girls of five and seven, came in from another room, staring at the strangers with open-eyed curiosity. One plucked her mother's sleeve and pointed. "Who be they?" she demanded.

She was a spoiled child, and her ignorance was without the proud reserve of the little mountaineers.

Mrs. Minter glanced down at her.

"Jus' chil'en come in to git shut o' the rain," she explained. "They are gwine down country to thar kin. Ain't that what you said?" she asked, turning toward the pair.

"To some folks o' ourn," assented Sam politely. He had come to feel that the asylum people in some way belonged to them of right.

The storm was beginning to abate; the rain fell lightly, a sort of thick drizzle. The soaked



"Who be they?" she demanded,



earth refused to absorb more, and moisture stood about in puddles. Mrs. Minter, glancing through the window, uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"Thar's that outdacious Brahma hen got all her chickens out in the rain," she fretted, "an' every last chicken will be drowned. Bother take her!"

She rose hurriedly from her seat. Sam arose also and stood Bunny on the floor.

"Hens will be aggervatin'," he said cheerily. "Look like they'd ruther. My sister's allus fussin' at ourn. Let me git 'em up for you. It's rainin' yet, an' you'll git draggled. Stay here, Bunny, 'long o' them pretty little gals. I'll be back in a minute."

Mrs. Minter said she would be "more than obliged" to him, and gave him a piece of cornbread with which to lure the hen back to her coop.

Sam hastened out. If he made himself useful, she might let them remain for the night. Another storm seemed to be coming up.

Bunny, left to his own devices, shook himself free of the quilt, and advanced toward the other children with great friendliness. He was a sociable little fellow, and tired of holding his tongue.

"I 've got a hen an' chickens up home, if sister ain't let 'em all die," he said. She 's a speckled topknot, an' she 's got sebenteen chickens. Dad says 't is a sight for one hen to tote."

Meeting with no response, he advanced nearer. One of the little girls was pretty, with yellow curls and china-blue eyes. Bunny mindful of his manners, held out his hand to her.

"Howdy!" he said, genially. "I's Bunny Colston. What's yo' name? We all kin play, can't we?"

The child backed away from him, and caught hold of her mother's dress.

"I sha'n't play with you," she retorted rudely. "You's ugly, an' yo' back's all humped out!"

Bunny looked astonished. The other child also jerked her mother's skirts.

"What makes him so ugly, ma?" she demanded. "What makes him so crooked?"

Mrs. Minter had been watching Sam through the window. She turned at the children's call, and regarded Bunny with hard curiosity.

"He's humpbacked," she announced, after scrutiny. That's what's the matter with him. His back's been broke."

"An' patched up crooked-crooked!" chanted the larger child viciously.

Bunny's face paled, then flushed crimson; his eyes flashed.

"'Tain't broke!" he asserted fiercely. "It 's jus' as good as anybody's back. 'Tain't nothin' the matter wid me!"

The woman laughed. The child's anger

and his pitiful assertion seemed funny to her. Her children laughed also and stuck out their tongues at Bunny.

The little fellow backed away from them.

"I ain't no humpback," he muttered; but his voice shook.

"Ain't you?" laughed the woman. "Sakes alive, child! Ain't anybody ever told you befo' you is deformed? Ain't you never seed yo'se'f?"

Then she did a cruel thing. Stepping across to the bureau, she tilted the mirror to the proper angle and drew the child in front of it, turning him a little sidewise. "Look over yo' shoulder," she directed. Then, catching hold of one of her own straight-backed children, she stationed her beside the deformed little one.

"See the diff'ence now?" she questioned, and laughed again.

"See me, straight, an' yo' crooked-crooked-crooked?" mocked the child shrilly.

Bunny did see. His face paled, his head drooped, and his eyes filled. He was only six years old, and it was his first taste of the tree of knowledge. A sense of injustice rankled in him.

These people mocked him for that which he could not help. Added to this, an aching horror of his own deformity was upon him. A child shrinks from singularity with nervous dread. Why was he different from others?

He crept away to the place where his quilt lay and sat down upon it, crying for his brother.

The woman, a trifle ashamed of herself, went into the next room and returned with a stick of candy, which she offered him. Bunny averted his face, mutely rejecting it. She had wounded him too deeply for such comforting to avail.

Being troubled enough to be uncomfortable, without being repentant, the woman grew ill-tempered over the rebuff.

7—Sam [99]

"'Tain't my fault you're humpbacked. You'll meet up with worse teasin' than mine afore you're done, I reckon. Folks God have 'flicted ain't got no business bein' touchy."

Sam, returning, wet but triumphant, was amazed at Bunny's tears, and at the energy with which the child clung to him.

"Why, baby, I was n't gone hardly a minute," he expostulated.

Then he glanced at Mrs. Minter, intending to apologize, and to explain that, being delicate, the little fellow had been spoiled; but something in the three strange faces, and also in Bunny's, caused him to change his mind.

Gathering up his belongings, and holding his brother by the hand, he turned to go, throwing a sentence back to the woman, in a hard tone:

"You sheltered us, but I reckon you've made us pay for it, Bunny an' me!"

NEW FRIENDS AND NEW HOPE

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CHAPTER V

NEW FRIENDS AND NEW HOPE

AM was bitterly indignant when he drew from Bunny the story of the way in which the woman had revealed his deformity to him. Sam's eyes glowed, and his fists were clinched. He longed to go back and give the woman a piece of his mind, but he could see how useless that would be, and he must look about for lodgings for the night.

"She had n't no call to treat you mean," he growled. "Bein' 'flicted is wuss for you to b'ar 'n 't is for her to look at. 'T was a low-down, measly trick—that 's what 't was. Ef I'd knowed what was gwine to happen the minute my back war turned, I'd ha' let them chickens drown—hen an' all."

Then he set himself to cheer the child.

"Don't you fret, baby! You 're a leetle mite out o' plumb now, but you ain't gwine to stay so. No, siree! Sam knows the way out'n that brier-patch. You 're gwine to be straight as anybody befo' long, an' straighter, too. You 'll see."

He nodded his head so triumphantly that Bunny stopped crying to ask questions.

"How, Sammy? How's I gwine to git straighted whenst I 'm started crooked?"

"You never started crooked," Sam explained eagerly. "You started right as anybody. You crawled off'n the po'ch whenst you was a baby, an' hurt yo' back agin rocks. You war n't lusty enough to git over it right by yo'se'f, an we-all did n't know what to do for you then."

"Did n't mammy?"

"Mammy died whenst you was too little an' tender to projeck with, I reckon. She mout'r knowed, bein' such a smart 'ooman," Sam explained, with a child's loyal admiration for his mother. "She knowed what to do for that 'r sweeten' apple tree in we-all's garden, mighty good. You know the sweeten' tree by the onion-patch?"

Bunny nodded. "It ain't crooked," he affirmed. "Dad names it the lusties' tree 'bout'n the place."

"Jus' so," assented Sam, "an' so 't is, now, But I 'members whenst dad run the wagon-wheel over it whenst 't war n't nothin' but a sprout an' mangled it all up. 'T were twisted an' momicked every which-a-way whenst it started to grow agin. Mammy she fixed it all up, an' suppo'ted it"—he avoided the word stake, fearing to suggest painful images to the child—"an' 'tended to it good, an' kep' on 'tendin' to it twill it got over bein' hurted, an' growed straight an' lusty. An' b'ars the sweetest apples! Don't it?"

Bunny grinned quite cheerfully. To his mind the analogy seemed perfect. Only there [105]

was no clever mother now to straighten him out. The tree had the best of it. His face fell.

"Mammy ain't here!" he mourned. "I can't git straighted, wantin' o' mammy."

"Yes, you kin," Sam declared. "Thar's folks down below here whar makes a business o' it. They make the smartest little jackets ever you seed, an' crooked chil'un w'ars 'em an' gits straight agin. Look a-here!"

Sam pulled out his old wallet, and extracted the precious scrap of paper.

"I found this here in a fence-corner close by home," he explained. "Somebody passin' had tho'd it away. Them pictures clinched me, 'count o' you, an' I got Pa'son Gardner to read the printin' to me. That tells whar the place is, an' how to get them'r little jackets. We-all air gwine arter one now!" he chuckled joyfully.

Bunny examined the woodcuts diligently. Presently the subject presented another aspect.

"Do them jackets hurt?" he demanded.

"No, I reckon not," responded Sam easily. "Jackets don't gen'ally hurt. Mine don't. You would n't mind bein' squoose a leetle mite to git straightened, would you, baby?"

"No," Bunny replied dubiously. "If 't war n't but a leetle mite. My back hurts some anyhow—'most eve'y day."

"That 's 'cause 'tain't suppo'ted," Sam assured him. "Whenst it gits a smart little jacket to brace it up right 't will quit hurtin' an' turn to gittin' lusty."

"Then I won't look droll no more n'other, will I?"

Sam shook his head.

"An' whenst we-all come on back with the jacket, we-all kin show them sassy chil'un I ain't droll, can't us?"

"We can that, an' we will!" declared Sam, his indignation fired once more by the mortification and wistfulness of the child's tone. "We-all will come back by here a-purpose to show 'em the straightes' back in the country we will!"

The children slept that night in the station waiting-room, having obtained permission from the agent. It was the last night they troubled people until they reached the end of their journey. Bunny's confidence in human kindness had received a rude shock, and an incident occurred the following morning which unsettled it further.

Sam was obliged to leave him for half an hour while he sought a job to procure food for the day. He put Bunny on a chair in the ticket-office and requested the agent to have an eye to him, which the man, a good-humored young fellow, promised to do.

The agent brought out some colored lithographs and an old "McGuffey's Reader," and chatted to him pleasantly, answering questions about the telegraph instrument, wires,

etc. But by and by he was called away to attend to the delivery of some freight, and Bunny, waxing weary of solitude, came out on the platform.

Instantly he was espied and surrounded by a flock of youngsters, white and black, of the mischievous sort who frequent railroad sta-

> tions. The agent being safely out of sight, they began tormenting the child.

> "Say, hump, whar be you gwine with that boy?" called

one facetiously, and the rest of the gang giggled.

"I bin hear 't was good luck to rub humpback folks'

hump," cried a little negro. "I gwine get some luck now, sho!"

EIMYN.

He began passing his hand roughly over the child's back; and the rest, gathering closer, [109]

imitated him, jesting rudely, and all trying to get their hands on at once.

Bunny, jolted about and hurt, began to cry and beat at them with his weak little fists.

This only delighted his tormentors more, and they hopped about him, jeering. It might have gone hard with the child, had not Trevor, who had been set by Sam to guard the wagon, heard his cries and rushed gallantly to the rescue, snapping at the legs of the boys nearest him.

"Sic 'em Trevor! sic 'em!" shouted Bunny, smiting his hands together, with his heart choked up with rage and bitterness.

The boys scattered in terror, but not before Trevor had set his teeth in the leg of the boy who had begun the badgering.

The noise brought out the agent, who, gathering an insight into the situation by the position of the little cripple crouched against the house-side, and the outcries of the other children, drove the whole crowd away,

threatening untold thrashings all around if he caught them loafing about the station making trouble again that day. He released the boy whom Trevor held, but gave him sour sympathy for his bitten leg.

"It's what you earned for yourself," he said; "so take your pay and quit howlin'. Go home an' tell your mammy I say to read you what happened to them outdacious boys in the Bible that set themselves to mock afflicted folks. 'T will be the best sort o' plaster for your leg. Now get out o' this, an' don't let me see your face for a week."

He comforted Bunny as well as he was able, and lost sight of him no more until Sam's return. The child, however, had become timid and apprehensive. Folks might be kind, like the agent, but they might not, and the chances were even.

His old trust in people because they were people had vanished, and he became afraid to take risks. Sam humored him, and, finding that it was best to avoid humanity with him, took to hiding him, wagon and all, in hollows and unfrequented places, while foraging for food.

They kept in sight of the railway. From time to time Sam would inform himself of their rate of progress by questioning agents. He was often footsore and weary, drawing the cart, but he held on pluckily.

The weather was trying them, likewise. Accustomed to the fresh, invigorating breath of the mountains, they found the heat of the low country, where they now were, well nigh insupportable; and Sam, although he had never heard of a sunstroke, ran hourly risk of falling victim to one as he plodded forward through the scorching heat.

Bunny's whole thought gradually centred upon his own cure. He began to hate his deformity and to long to escape from it, together with the miseries which it entailed upon him.

He made Sam repeat to him over and over

the story of their sweet-apple tree, and show him the woodcuts in the circular until the paper seemed likely to be worn to fragments by handling. He made plans for himself stalwart plans of what he would do when he should become strong and straight, like Sam and Charlie.

He would cut wood for Millie and drive the team and work in the cornfield. Nobody could call him "po' leetle creeter" then, nor "hunchback," nor even "afflicted of God." This last phrase fortunately conveyed little meaning to his mind; but it was sonorous and terrible, and Bunny, not understanding, quailed under it.

"Will them thar leetle jackets cert'n'y cure me?" he demanded of Sam many times.

And Sam, whose faith in the people to whom he was carrying his brother increased in ratio proportionate to his own struggles to reach them, always positively assured the child that there was no doubt of it. Bunny unexpectedly had his doubts laid at rest, and bolstered from another quarter. Sam had left him in a shady little hollow beside a spring while he made one of his customary visits to a farmhouse of the handsomer sort with which lower Virginia is filled.

The boys had found that farmers' people were most responsive to their needs, and also most in want of a sort of service which Sam could render.

Bunny, with Trevor for company, lay happy and contented on his quilt in the shadow of a live-oak, watching the breeze stir the leaves and listening to the shrilling of a cicada. It was very warm and still in the little hollow; the scented air fanned him softly, and his eyes grew heavy. Trevor watched him, drowsy-eyed himself. The child's eyelids fell together, and he slept, but the dog roused himself, yawned and stretched himself, and, being hungry, departed down the little stream to dig out crawfish.



"Wake up, I say!"

8-Sam

Along a narrow path which led into the glen waddled an old Muscovy drake, limping on one leg, and grumbling to himself after the manner of drakes. Behind him came a little girl, who halted also, bearing more on one foot than the other.

She was neatly dressed, and had a bright, pretty face, with big eyes that had shadows under them, showing that pain was no stranger to her little frame. The small maiden seemed intelligent beyond her years, and also looked what she was, the child of gentle-people.

When she caught sight of Bunny asleep on his quilt, her face dimpled all over, and she smote her hands softly together.

Abandoning the drake to his own devices, she squatted down on the quilt and broke off a long bit of grass with a seeded end.

"Wake up!" she laughed. "Wake up, I say!" and tickled his nose with the grass.

Bunny clawed at his face with his hands, [117]

rolled over, and opened his eyes. When he caught sight of the girl he lay quite still, staring with all his might. Soon another expression dawned in his eyes—a hunted, frightened expression; he shrank together. The other child noticed the look at once.

"What are you afraid of?" she demanded. "I ain't going to hurt you."

As he struggled into a sitting posture she saw that he was deformed, and a wave of sympathy swept over her face. Being a little gentlewoman, she made no comment, but only leaned forward and shook hands with him cordially.

"I live over there," she said, nodding in the direction whence she had come. "I am Maud Stanhope. What is your name?"

Bunny told her, noticing, child though he was, that she was somehow different from the people he had been seeing lately. He drew closer to her.

"Is that your drake?" he questioned, seek[118]

ing refuge in matters he could understand. "Millie's got a drake, but 'tain't green all over like yourn. It's got a green head, though, an' it's got three ducks—white ones."

"Polands, I reckon," observed Maud, with an air of wisdom. "We've got some, too, but I hate 'em. Horrid, greedy things they are, always fighting the baby chickens. I like Lord Byron, though. Father says I 've got a fellow-feeling for him."

Bunny looked bewildered, and she laughed and pointed toward the drake, who was dabbling and fishing in the little stream.

"Father named him," she explained, with a laugh. "Lord Byron was a poet, and he had a club foot, like poor old Muscovy and me."

She thrust one foot and ankle from beneath her dress. One leg from above the knee was in a framework of steel bands and plates and soft straps of leather, securely buckled. The frame went down into her shoe, which indeed formed a part of it, and was cleverly hinged at the knee so as not to interfere with motion. Bunny thrilled with interest.

"What ails your leg?" he queried with eagerness.

"My ankle was all twisted, and my foot set round crooked—like this," demonstrating with the sound one. "It was drefful, and when I was real little I could n't walk. I'm nine years old now, and I can walk right good. After a while mother says I can leave off wearing my brace and walk like other folks."

"Wha 'd you git that thing?" He touched the brace with his finger.

"Father got it. He took me to a big town where doctors live and had my leg 'zamined, and the doctor made my brace for me. My leg 's getting real strong now, and every time the doctor sees it he says, 'Little maid, this is doing bravely. You 'll dance at your wedding yet.'" She laughed out gleefully.

Bunny quivered with excitement. Here [120]

was a cure such as Sam described, being actually performed.

"Do it hurt?" he queried.

"Not now. It felt funny till I got used to it. And my ankle aches anyhow sometimes. Mother says 't would ache worse without my brace, and then I could n't walk at all. I love to walk myself."

The little girl showed him how the mechanism worked, and explained it as well as she could.

"I can't show you any better," she said. "Mother won't let me take it off myself. I might do something bad to my foot. She takes it off herself when it ought to come, and rubs my leg with stuff the doctor gives her."

Bunny regarded her with solemnity.

"Be you 'flicted o' God?" he demanded. "I be, folks says."

The little girl looked bewildered, as well she might.

"My foot was born twisted," she said. Then, brightening up, she proceeded:

"Mother says lots of folks are careless with little babies; forget 'em and leave 'em alone, and all sorts of horrid things, so that their little bones get hurt and tumbled up while they 're tender. God can't help that, you know, because he gave the babies to people for their very own—just like father can't make me not break my dolls up. He can mend 'em, though. Mother says that 's what God does.

"When the stupid, careless people let the dear babies get hurt, God is so sorry about it that he shows good, clever people how to undo the mischief, and fix 'em back like they ought to be. Mother tells me about it lots of times."

This was, as yet, beyond Bunny's comprehension; but he thought it sounded nice, and also that this was the very pleasantest little girl he had ever seen. He nestled closer to her.

"My back is goin' to get mended," he announced. "We-all air on the way now arter one o' them little jackets folks put on crooked chil'un to make 'em grow straight. Sam knows whar to go arter one. He 's takin' me

to town to git undoubled."

Maud nodded cheerfully, perfectly convinced of the feasibility of the experiment. Then she put questions in her turn, and learned a great deal about Bunny's home



people, and especially about his brother Sam.

But about the situation of his home the child was vague. It was on a hill, he said, and had great big mountains round it, but that was all he knew. The journey had confused the little fellow's notions of locality.

He had come a long way, he said, and Sam had pulled him in his wagon.

So well amused were the children with each other that when Sam returned with a full bucket and a bottle of milk given him by the kind lady at the farm, he had some difficulty in persuading Bunny to consent to moving onward.

He kissed his hand to Maud again and again as his wagon trundled off, and called cheerily: "I 'll come to see you whenst my back gits cured, sure an' certain!"

THE JOURNEY'S END

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CHAPTER VI

THE JOURNEY'S END

HE sun shone scorchingly. The atmosphere was hot and stirless, the road over which Sam was laboriously dragging Bunny stretched dustily into the distance until it merged into a suburban street. There was a terrible drought in the low country, and this 30th of August the thermometer registered ninety degrees in the shade.

Vegetation was scorched and twisted, and the leaves along the wayside drooped dejectedly. Only the magnolias showed vigor enough to hold their stiff foliage in its natural position; and even on them the leaves looked choked, bearing each its thick covering of dust. Sam had erected a shelter of bushes over the wagon, so that Bunny was in a measure protected; but the sun beat down on Sam's own head and well nigh addled his brains.

He kept the crown of his hat filled with leaves, which he wet at every stream he crossed. This precaution, learned from negroes along the roadside, had doubtless saved him from sunstroke. He had a bad stone-bruise on one of his feet, and so was forced to hobble on his heel. But this did not daunt his spirit, for his journey was drawing to a close, and even now, with his wayworn and dirty little outfit, he was entering the very city wherein was the goal of his hopes.

"This here 's the place, Bun!" he declared triumphantly, after questioning a wayfarer. But at sight of the houses, clustered together in the suburbs, Bunny appeared bewildered.

"How 'll you find the house, Sam?" he questioned, anxiously. "Thar 's so many—hun'eds

an' hun'eds. Did n't look like thar could be such a lot o' folks in the world.

"I 'll find the right house fast enough," Sam pluckily assured him. "I ain't dragged you all them miles to be daunted right at the finish. God ha' gin me a tongue, an' I p'int'ly knows how to use it."

He plodded forward, followed faithfully by the dog.

People eyed the procession curiously, wondering what caper that ragged boy could be up to. Once or twice they called to him to keep out of the middle of the street or he would get run over. Under the bushy tent they could see a child sitting on a folded quilt, with a pillow behind him.

"Some little country tacks," most people decided, and paid no further heed to them.

The hot cobblestones burned Sam's swollen feet, and caused his stone-bruise to throb cruelly. He looked about anxiously for some one who seemed sufficiently at leisure to di-

rect him. The city noises bewildered him and all the passers seemed in a hurry.

9

In a moment he espied a man in his shirtsleeves lounging in a shop-door, who looked as if he might have time to answer a question. Sam drew his convoy to the curbstone and took his precious circular, considerably the worse for wear, from his pocket.

"Kin you tell me how to find that thar house?" he asked. "I 've come consid'r'ble ways to find it."

The man turned the circular in his hand. He had seen a great many of them. A benevolent institution a few blocks away put them out by the thousand.

"Where'd you get this?" he questioned.

Something in the appearance of the lad and his belongings excited his curiosity. The men from the shops on each side joined the group.

"I found it blowed up in a fence-corner nigh home," Sam explained readily. "Some passer had flung it away, an' it lit thar."

The grocer, from the right-hand shop, looked Sam over from crown to heel.

"This is a hospital for spinal cripples," he remarked. "Ain't you made some mistake? You look right as a trivet."

"My little brother ain't," Sam responded, pointing to the wagon. "I 've fetched him down to be cured; if so be them folks air able."

The men's eyes began to open, and the dealer in boots and shoes from the left-hand shop asked:

"Where'd you come from, my lad?"

Sam named a county in the western part of the state, up along the Blue Ridge. The men stared.

"Do you mean to say, boy, that you 've walked all the way from the Blue Ridge Mountains, and dragged that child in his wagon?' cried the fruit-dealer, to whom Sam had first spoken.

Sam nodded.

"We got a lift once in a while," he replied 9-Sam [131]

literally. "But mostly I dragged him. He was 'bleeged to be fetched arter we-all foun' out thar was a chance to straighten him, an' thar war n't no yuther way. I were able to tackle the job—anyhow I done it," he smiled triumphantly.

The fruit-dealer pushed back his hat.

"Great Scotland!" he said, "but you 're clean grit!"

The other men nodded an energetic acquiescence.

They drew the little wagon up on the pavement and into the fruit shop, and stripped off the bushes. Bunny looked troubled at first, not being sure of the treatment he might meet. The men seemed more taken up with Sam than with him, however, although the fruit-man gave him a sweet cake and two peaches.

There were so many new things for Bunny to look at that he kept quiet and munched contentedly, after he had given a peach to Sam.

They plied Sam with questions and drew from him the history of his exploit, all save the fact that his father was still an able-bodied man and owned a yoke of oxen. Sam had pride of family, and was loyal to his own.

He might fret at the parental worthlessness in his own mind, or to his brother and sister, but he was above exhibiting his concern on this point to strangers. His mother was dead, he told them, and his father "pow'ful 'flicted wi' rheum'tism." Then he passed on to other matters.

When questioned why he did not make known his scheme in the villages he passed through and take up a subscription to bring his brother on the train, Sam opened wide eyes at them. He had no adequate notion of what a subscription might be, and was, moreover, accustomed to self-reliance.

"Why should I pester folks bout a thing I war able to squar' myse'f?" he inquired. "Weall don't roust ther neighbors for holp whar

I come from, 'thout'n we be ailin'. I be a lusty fellow, an' the wagon ain't cumbersome. It took mo' time 'n we-all looked for, but the baby ain't worsted none to notice."

He seemed to make no account of his own fatigue. The fruit-dealer, whose name was Jones, took the children upstairs to his wife, whom he requested to feed them and the dog, and also to look after Sam's foot.

"When you get rested and tidied up some, I'll take you round to the institution myself," he told Sam kindly. "Some customers of mine live about there, and I know the matron and resident doctor."

Then he descended to the store again, and summoned a meeting of his neighbors. He was an enthusiastic man, but practical withal. Opening his cash-drawer, he took out a banknote and tossed it into an empty berry-box, which he extended invitingly.

"Chip in, gentlemen!" he cried; "chip in! We ain't up to anything as fine as that little [134]

chap's trip down from the Blue Ridge on his own legs to help his brother, but we can take one rock out of his path. He 's got sand, that boy, and he must n't be balked right at the end. He has n't a cent o' money. That place for spinal cripples is a benevolent institution, as much as it can be without endowment. But they are obliged to charge a small fee till some rich chap leaves 'em a pile. The fee ain't much, and I reckon we can raise it."

"That 's right!" he said, as the quarters and half-dollars rattled into the box. "Thankee, gentlemen. Now I 'll step around and see about an admission ticket."

He put on his coat, and, leaving word for the children to remain where they were until his return, betook himself to the "Spine-Cure," as it was commonly called. The superintendent—a clever, cultured woman, whose heart was in her work—happened to be disengaged, and listened to Mr. Jones's story with keen interest.

"Do you mean that they came without money or help, other than occasional lifts in farm wagons and presents of food? That this boy Sam pulled his brother in a cart hundreds of miles on the chance of our being able to do him some good?"

"That 's the story, madam," Jones assented. "It 's true, too, as you 'll see when you 've talked to the children. They 're mountaineers, and ignorant little fellows in many ways."

"This boy Sam, it seems, is intelligent enough to have done a remarkably fine thing," the lady declared heartily.

"Just so, madam; just so. And he is as unconscious of its fineness as one of his own mountains is of having its brow above the clouds. God comes so to the lowly, ma'am—right down into 'em."

"When can you bring the children in?"

"At once, madam, if you are ready for 'em. And we—my neighbors and I—chipped in the [136]

admission fee. Here it is. Oh, no," deprecating her gesture of refusal, "the Institution needs it, and we can spare it. Don't mind our having a hand in the job, too."

The lady smiled and took out her pocketbook.

"Well, then, since you wish it," she acquiesced cordially. "Now I must consult with Doctor Grey about the child. He must go into the infants' ward at first."

"I'll look after Sam,"
Mr. Jones declared, as
he took his leave. "I



want a good boy about the shop and to deliver goods. This fellow 's proved his mettle, and he 's country-bred, so he will know how to manage a horse. He 'll have to stay with the baby a few days, I reckon, till the strangeness

wears off. Then you can turn him over to me."

So it was finally arranged between them. Mrs. Jones, having gathered the children's story, made them very comfortable. She wrapped Sam's stone-bruise with soothing ointment, and gave Bunny a bath and a change of clothing. She was much interested in Sam's hope of a cure, and gave him a good deal of encouragement.

"This Institution has turned out a good many cures since it started," she told them. "There's spine complaints that can't be cured, of course, but most sorts can if they are taken young enough. I knew a child worse off than this one whose back got cured."

Bunny leaned against her knee.

"Cured straight and strong—real straight, like other folks?" he questioned wistfully. He could not receive assurance enough that this thing was possible.

Bunny went to the hospital and Sam had a [138]

terribly anxious time while he was undergoing the medical examination. He was not allowed in the room, so he stood in the hall outside the surgery door and leaned against it.

Strain his ears as he would, he could hear no sound, so he felt sure the child was being gently handled. But the strain on his own nerves grew heavy, and he clinched his fists and dug his bare toes into the hall matting to hold himself steady.

"O Lord!" he groaned. "S'posin' 'tain't no use! S'posin' he can't git cured arter all! I 'd better ha' left him up yonder at home, maybe—not knowin' nothing'. If nothin' can't be done, I 'll feel like I 'd trapped a pore creeter an' then h'isted the door a leetle mite to make him think he was gwine to git loose, an' at the las' minute, whenst his'n paws was fa'ly out, banged the door shut agin. Lordy! Lordy! but I 'm skeered!"

The perspiration stood on his forehead, and [139]

his eyes took on a positively haggard expression. Doctor Grey, coming out at last, saw how it was with him, and laid a kind hand on his shoulder. He liked the lad already.

"Cheer up, my boy!" he said. "There 's hope, and good hope, too. The little fellow's curvature is simple, and you 've brought him to us in time. With care and patience, we 'll straighten him out, I think. It will be a slow job, and a long one. You must make up your minds to that, both of you. But with care and patience, as I say, there is, humanly speaking, no reason why we should not succeed."

Then, to his surprise, Sam, in his relief, in his thankfulness, laid his head against the door-frame and broke into weeping.

"'T was me done it," he confessed, between his sobs. "Me, though I never went to. Mammy lef' me to mind Bun whilst she went to milkin'. The dogs jumped up a squ'r'l an' yelped lusty, treein' him. I forgot all 'bout'n

the baby, an' clipped out to holp 'em an lef' the door open. Ther po'ch flo' to home is three foot above groun', an' Bunny aimed to follow me, an' crawled off an' banged his back agin rocks. We-all never knowed what to do for him till I found that paper. Look like to me if that had n't been no chance for hisn pore lettle back I couldn' 'a' 'greed to kep' on livin'."

Doctor Grey kept his hand on the boy's shoulder. This outbreak would be a relief, he knew. He understood Sam better now, and admired him more. This sturdy sort of practical repentance appealed to his own manhood. "And shouldest thou inflict evil upon thy brother, carelessly, go straightway and undo unto him that which thou hast done, confessing thyself unto the Lord, and sorrowing for thy sin." The words repeated themselves in his brain, and he said them out to Sam.

"You 've done that, my lad," he observed,
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kindly. "You've tried to undo the evil you did 'carelessly,' and I think, with God's blessing, it will be undone. Now dry your tears, for here comes Bunny, and he will think all sorts of dreadful things if he finds you crying."

The next day Sam approached the matron shyly.

"What is it?" she said, seeing a request in his face.

"The folks at home," he answered wistfully. "I can't write yet, but I 'm gwine to learn. They ought to know 'bout'n the baby, an' I 'lowed you mout n't mind writin' for me one time. We-all kin send the letter to keer o' Pa'son Gardner, an' he 'll tote it over an' read it to 'em. I promised Millie an' Bud."

Allowing herself only the license of correct spelling, the kind lady wrote absolutely at Sam's dictation. The letter ran thus:

"Dear Dad, Millie an' Bud.—We-all, Bun, [142]

Trevor an' me, got here all right, but mighty tired. Bun stood the trip first-rate, and it never hurted him none. He fretted at first to go back home, but after he ketched on to what I was up to, he behaved as well as anybody. The dog overtook us the first night—jumped out of the bushes in the dark and scared Bun nigh to death; he thought 't was a bear and just hollered! He 's gaunt—Trevor is—along of hard travel and short rations, but he 's all right.

"The doctors overhauled Bunny yesterday, and handled him tender. The baby never even winced. They say there ain't no reason agin his being cured. 'T will take time, but it can be done. The longness ain't nothing if the job will work right in the end, only we-all can't get home soon as I promised. It took longer to get here than I allowed.

"Charlie 'll have to get outside help with the fodder—any of the boys 'll come whenst they hear I 've got to stay with Bun till he gets used to the place and the folks here. They don't charge nothing hardly for Bunny here, Bud, so don't you fret, but look sharp after the stock and the crop, and take care of Millie and dad. I 'll look out for the baby. Bun sends his love and a kiss to Millie. So do I.

"A nice man here has given me a job. Get Mr. Gardner to write and tell we-all how you are, and whether you get this letter.

"Bunny's back 's going to be straight!

"Your loving brother and son, Sam Colston."

Sam's letter proved to be prophecy. Bunny's back became straight, though it took weeks, and even months, of care and patience. And there was something more, for during these weeks and months the kind friends at the hospital, and those who had helped him obtain entrance there, combined in a plan for the future. Bunny was to have an education, and Sam, too, and through them happiness

and the light of knowledge were to be carried to the home among the hills. Sam's education began at once. By the time Bunny was well, Sam was able to write the good news home, and when they returned home at last with Bunny straight and well and happy, they brought with them the means of educational beginnings for all.

That was several years ago. Bunny is a medical student now in the hospital where he found his cure. Sam is a teacher among the hills where he was born, helping others to live in the better way he has found, and Millie is keeping house for Bunny. Charlie alone remains on the farm, and is farming in such a manner that others have taken him as an example, and the district among the hills is no longer a land of shiftlessness and ignorance. And all this was begun from the resolulution of one poor ignorant boy to bring about the cure of a child's misfortune; so perhaps after all the misfortune was not a misfortune.

Perhaps in a greater plan than any we may know, the hump on Bunny's back was not put there as an affliction, but as a blessing in disguise.

